

Oakland Has Had Many Big Fires In Its 100 Years But No City-Wide Conflagration

Oakland has had tens of thousands of fires in its 100 years, but none approaching in magnitude the conflagrations other cities have suffered.

Among the most spectacular of Oakland's fires have been the following:

1867: The Chinese settlement on the east side of Telegraph "Road" between 16th and 17th Streets caught fire when an oil lamp exploded and fired the inflammable shelters, shortly after the colony had been moved from its former location at 14th Street, between Washington and Clay.

The Chinese, pioneer William E. Blote has written, complacently watched, making noises "like a flock of geese." The Fire Department didn't do much better; the little town burned to the ground.

CITY HALL BURNS

August 25, 1877: The three-story Oakland City Hall, costing \$70,000 in 1869, was destroyed. Twenty-nine prisoners in the basement jail were trapped, but rescued. Arson was suspected and a \$1000 reward posted. Nothing came of it.

March 9, 1880: The Grand Central Hotel, between Webster and Harrison on 12th Street, was destroyed in an early-morning holocaust. Eight other buildings including Dr. Samuel Merritt's Webster House were also burned to the ground. Whipped by a furious northwest gale, flying embers started innumerable fires, destroyed two homes as far distant from the hotel as Seventh and Jackson. For a time it was believed the entire southeast section of the city was doomed. Total loss was \$355,000.

June 20, 1882: The Long Wharf at Gibbons' Point extending into the Bay from Seventh Street burned in an early-morning conflagration which thrilled thousands in Oakland and San Francisco.

Three small ships moored at the pier were towed away, but the larger bark Great Western, loaded with 2000 tons of coal, was mired in four feet of mud

and burned to the waterline, a total loss.

Fire locomotives and fire boats fought the blaze valiantly. Total damage, to ships and pier was \$60,000.

Next day, thousands of persons from Oakland and San Francisco visited the scene; as with all disasters at that time, the populace inspected the scene in a carnival mood.

TUBBS HOTEL BLAZE

August 14, 1893: The block-square Tubbs Hotel fronting on Fifth Avenue and East 12th Street was destroyed when the three-story, mansard-roofed, 216-room structure burned in a conflagration visible throughout the Eastbay.

April 18, 1906: Ironically, as San Francisco burned on the day of the great earthquake, Oakland had only one fire. An overturned oil lamp ignited a home at Ninth and Kirkham.

April 22, 1923: High winds whipped a blaze at the California Cotton Mills, Kennedy Street and Railroad Avenue. Damage was \$50,000. Heroic efforts by the Fire Department saved the section.

June 19, 1923: The Eureka Lumber and Planing Mills, occupying almost a square block at 36th Avenue and East 14th Street, was destroyed in a spectacular conflagration which drew thousands of spectators. Huge piles of lumber fed flames so hot that they repeatedly ignited the asphalt of East 14th Street. Damage was placed at \$60,000.

EARLY GRASS FIRES

September 17, 1923: Fanned by roaring high winds, a fire swept through the canyon at Leona Heights, rolled towards Mills College, then swerved towards Chabot Observatory when the wind changed. Four hundred acres were burned over. Sixteen other fires throughout Oakland destroyed five homes.

1924: Three schools in Oakland, one in Alameda and one in El Cerrito were burned to the ground by an arsonist in a 10-

month period. Loss was placed at \$625,000. A score of industrial plants and residences were fired in the same period with a loss in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. The arsonist, who when trapped could not remember all the fires he had touched off, was a 14-year-old boy who "just liked to watch fires."

LABOR TEMPLE LEVELLED

October 16, 1924: The Oakland Labor Temple at 11th and Franklin Streets was leveled in a four-alarm fire which collapsed the Temple's roof between the time of discovery and arrival of fire equipment. Loss was estimated at \$60,000.

January 24, 1927: The Claremont Country Club at Broadway and Clifton Street burned to the ground in a \$250,000 early-morning fire. The three-story structure, covering almost a block, was a famed gathering-place of Oakland's socially prominent. A watchman, Charles Waterman, lost his life when trapped in attempting to fight the flames.

February 9, 1931: The Oakland National Horse Show had completed its nine-day showing when flames destroyed the temporary buildings, killed four men and 48 horses.

KEY ROUTE PIER

February 24, 1931: Patrons at the Orpheum Theater sat for an hour in ignorance of the fact that a three-story and loft building next door was burning to the ground. Following several explosions, a general alarm summoned virtually all firemen and apparatus in the city. Dense smoke overcame firemen and for a time it seemed the conflagration might spread. Adjacent streets were jam-packed with spectators and evening traffic on Broadway and Franklin Street was halted for four hours. When smoke seeped into the Orpheum Theater, which was protected by its heavy fire wall, patrons left in orderly fashion. Thirteen persons were injured; property damage was placed at \$350,000.

May 6, 1933: A \$3,000,000 fire swept the Key Route Pier, which

burned to the water line. The ferryboat Peralta, 300 yards of trackage and 17 steel cars were also destroyed. Thousands of persons crowded the waterfront, watched the blaze. No lives were lost; by good fortune, a boatload of commuters had entrained for

Oakland immediately before the wildfiring flames were discovered at 9:50 p.m.

February 28, 1943: The Albers Mill, at the foot of Seventh Street in West Oakland, became a roaring inferno when great stores of grain and cereal burned. One of

Oakland's worst fires, loss was set at \$6,000,000.

March 15, 1949: A \$9,000,000 fire at the Oakland Army Base destroyed property, damaged docks, scorched ships and ate up tons of supplies destined for overseas. Exploding oil drums

shot into the sky like rockets. A soldier started the conflagration so that he might be rewarded for discovering it.

April 19, 1949: Nearly half a business block at East 14th Street and 23rd Avenue was destroyed when a \$500,000 five-alarm fire

shrouded East Oakland in smoke, fouled peak morning commuter service, and drew thousands of persons to the scene. Ninety-five fire-fighters and 23 pieces of equipment controlled the conflagration after a two and a half hour battle.

Cannery blaze, Tahoe drownings

TUE JUL 5 1988

By The Tribune staff, news services

Fireworks may have sparked a \$100,000 blaze that gutted a vacant Del Monte cannery building in Oakland late last night, one of scores of fires reported throughout the Eastbay as the holiday weekend came to a close.

"There have been nothing but fires since around 9 p.m.," said Oakland Fire Department Assistant Chief Don Matthews. He said fireworks were being shot off in the night sky around 29th Avenue as firefighters

brought the 10 p.m., two-alarm cannery fire under control. He said the building was engulfed in flames when crews arrived and the fire may have been fireworks-related.

"Fortunately it was cold and damp and the grass fires didn't get moving or it could have been more serious," Matthews said.

Illegal fireworks were to blame for the state's largest wildfire of the season near Yosemite National Park.

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way where firefighters

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TAH DENTAL COSTS!

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The fire ultimately burned 2,500 acres.

Fireworks may also have caused a fire in Sacramento's American River Parkway that scorched almost 15 acres, sparking three roof fires and engulfing the area in dense smoke, officials said yesterday.

In one holiday weekend tragedy, a brother and sister from Hayward drowned in Lake Tahoe on Sunday while trying to chase an inflatable raft that was pushed from the shore by stiff winds. Several boaters tried to rescue Robert D. Nguyen, 15, and Kim T. Nguyen, 13 but were unsuccessful, South Lake Tahoe police said..

The brother and sister were last seen at 7:15 p.m. near Ski Run Marina by the Heavenly Resort. Their bodies were pulled from waters 15 deep at 7:29 p.m.

The California Highway Patrol reported 1,957 arrests for drunken driving in California between 6 p.m. Friday and 6 a.m. yesterday. Forty-five people had died by yesterday morning in traffic accidents on state highways, said department spokesman Steve Kohler.

In the Eastbay, police reported relative calm with noisy firecrackers and loud parties being the worst offenses.

Fire officials throughout the drought-dry state had warned that fireworks could spark brush fires this holiday weekend and vowed to confiscate any that were found.

The Sacramento blaze started about 2:30 p.m. along a bike path on the north bank of the American River. Gusts up to 25 mph fanned the blaze east to Riverwalk Way, where firefighters were able to stop it from reaching the Sacramento County Sheriff's Academy.

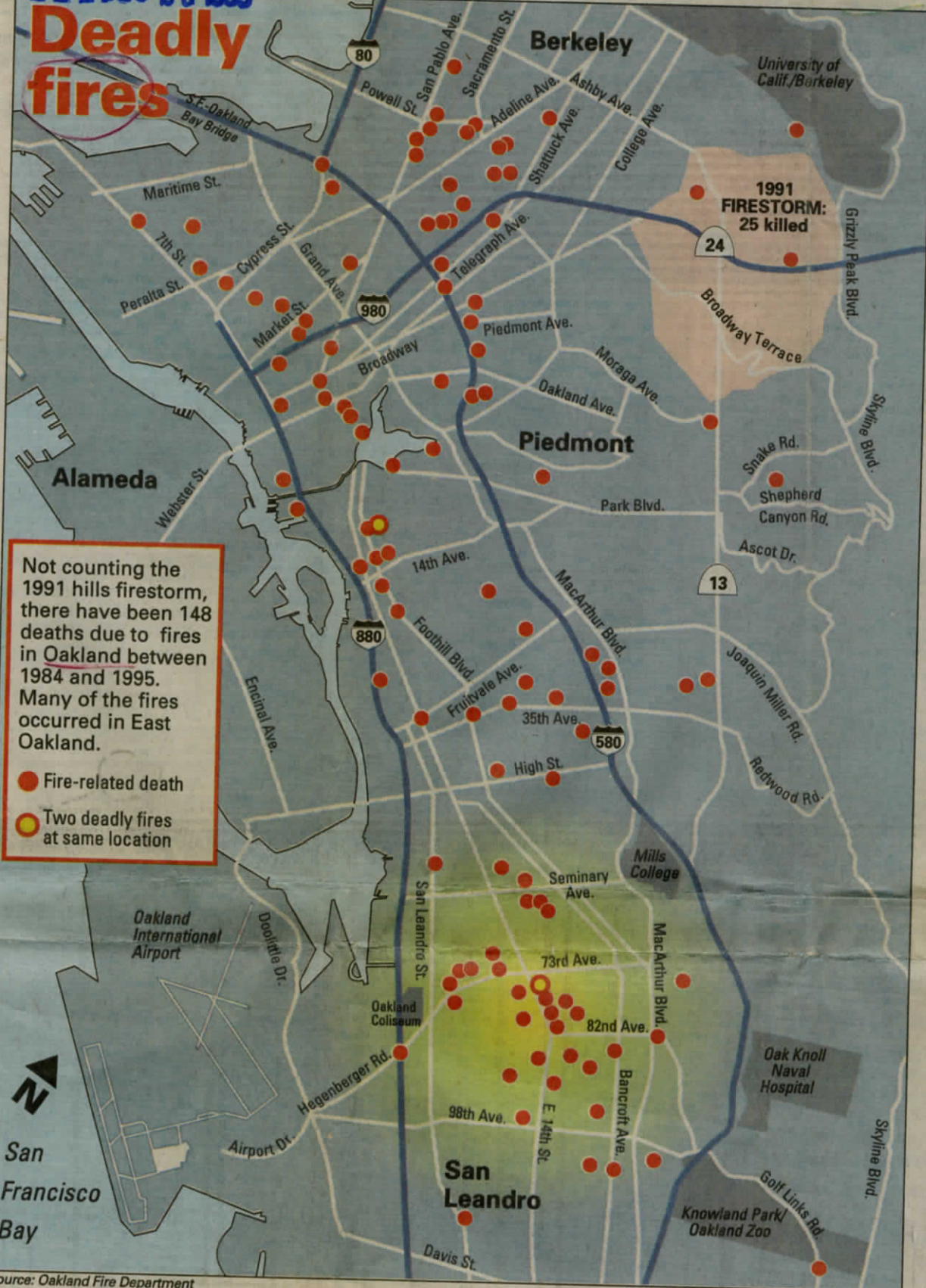
Several river rafters reported seeing children playing with fireworks in the area just before the blaze broke out, Battalion Chief Carl Shaw said. The exact cause of the fire was under investigation yesterday.

More than 30 firefighters, including off-duty personnel, responded to the fire. There were no serious injuries. Many homeowners near the fire spent yesterday afternoon atop their houses, watering down roofs and nearby grass and shrubs.

tragic legacy of death

THU DEC 26 1995

Deadly fires



THU DEC 26 1995

City's fire fatalities again buck national averages

This is the first of a two-day series on Oakland fire deaths. Today: Analyzing the high number of deaths.

By Craig Staats
STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND — During the past 20 years, the number of people killed in fires has dropped steadily in the United States, but Oakland's death rate has stubbornly remained one of the highest in the country.

A computer-assisted review by The Oakland Tribune of fire fatalities in the city since 1984 shows Oakland's death rate is 50 percent higher than San Francisco's, three times

the California average and seven times higher than San Jose's.

Fire Chief P. Lamont Ewell said Oakland's numbers mirror those in other cities with older housing and a large, poor population. But even so, the death toll deeply disturbs him.

"When I look at it locally, I get really scared," Ewell said.

So far this year, 18 people have died in Oakland fires, the most recent a 78-year-old West Oakland grandmother who tried to fight a fire in her bedroom earlier this month.

In the past 12 years, 148 people have perished in house and apartment fires in the city — and that doesn't include the 25 who died in the 1991 East Bay hills firestorm.

"For our population, we shouldn't be losing this many people," said Fire Capt. Don Parker.

Fire experts blame Oakland's high fire death rate on the poverty of many of its residents, crowded

"(Those) children would have lived if those security bars had been working properly."

Fire Capt. Don Parker
referring to the Oct. 14 fire on 71st Avenue, where five children died

living quarters that put more people at risk when a fire does break out, carelessness and anti-burglary security bars that can trap people in their homes.

A striking number of Oakland's fatal fires have occurred in a relatively small section of the East Oakland flatlands.

They include the city's most horrific recent fire, on Oct. 14, when five children died in a blaze on 71st Avenue, trapped by security bars on the windows. The bars lacked a required release mechanism.

Homeowner David Starnes, who lives two blocks away, says the fire hit too close. He has four girls and worries about their safety.

"That was a tragedy. ... It could have been us," Starnes said. "You never know."

Rose Holloway, who has lived in East Oakland for 43 years, said she was horrified by the 71st Avenue blaze.

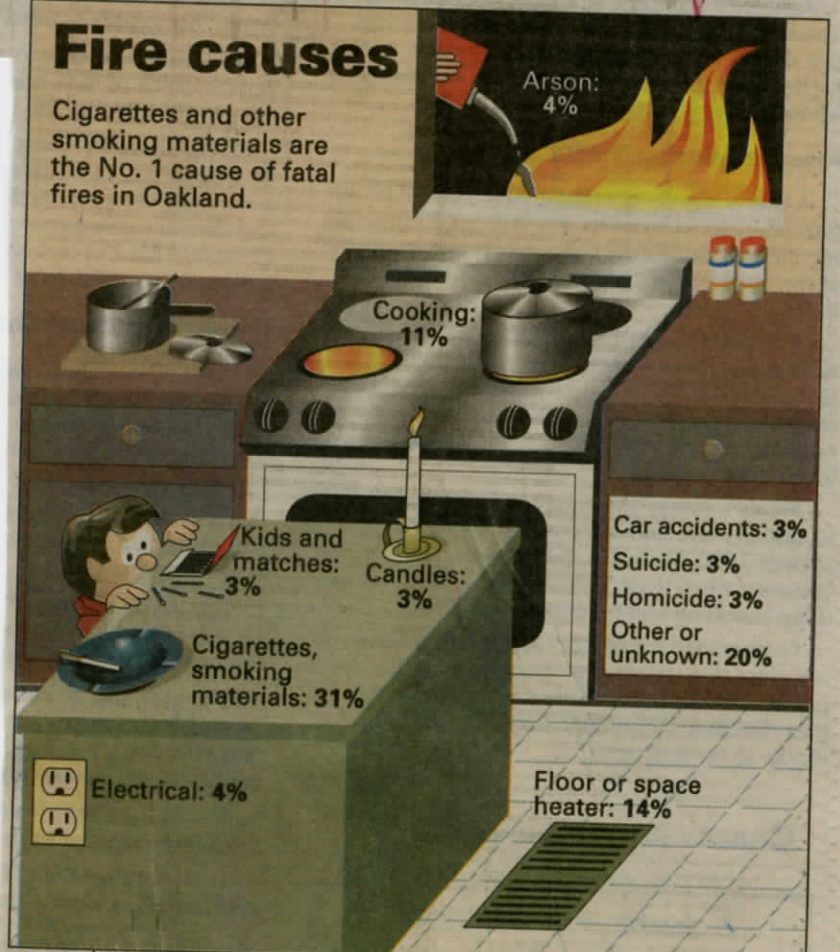
"That was awful and the thing that bothered me was how they couldn't get out," Holloway said. "You bar yourself in and you're not locking the criminals out. You're really locking yourself in. That's bad."

Oakland's fire death toll for 1995 would be 13, instead of 18, if there had been release mechanisms on the bars, firefighters say.

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Fire causes

Cigarettes and other smoking materials are the No. 1 cause of fatal fires in Oakland.



Source: Oakland Fire Department

JEFF QUAN—Staff

Deaths link deaths to conditions of poverty

Early one-quarter of Oakland's fatal fires since 1984 have occurred in a 2½-square-mile area of East Oakland bounded roughly by 73rd and 98th avenues, MacArthur Boulevard and San Leandro Street.

Only about 8 percent of Oakland's population lives in the area, which includes the neighborhoods of Eastmont, Arroyo Viejo, Castle-mont and Cox.

Yet it has accounted for nearly 25 percent of the city's fatal fires in the past dozen years. The district, filled with older, wood-frame bungalows, is about 75 percent African American.

Fire experts say there is a strong correlation between poverty and the risk of becoming a fire victim. More than 18 percent of people in Oakland live below the poverty line.

John Hall, who analyzes fire statistics for the National Fire Protection Association, said poverty forces people into less safe choices, such as using makeshift heating and cooking arrangements or furnishing homes with older, less fire-resistant furniture.

Hall said part of the national drop in fire deaths is the result of product safety advances, like space heaters that turn themselves off if they fall over or lighters that are more difficult for children to misuse. But newer, safer products can be too costly for poor families.

In depressed neighborhoods, fire safety also takes a back seat to other, more pressing concerns, such as putting food on the table.

"People are dealing with a lot of issues in their lives," said Meri-K Appy, the Quincy, Mass.-based fire protection group's assistant vice president for public education. "Fire safety may not be on the top of the agenda."

And in poor neighborhoods, there are also more single-parent families, which can mean less supervision of young children, Hall noted.

"Even the best and most conscientious parents can have lapses," he said.

Although experts commonly do not talk about it, another factor in neighborhoods where drug use is

City at odds with state over reports

The California State Fire Marshal tries to keep a complete record of fire deaths in the state. But, in its latest table, there is an asterisk next to the 1992 and 1993 totals. It belongs to Oakland.

"Oakland FD (Fire Department) not included," a footnote explains.

Oakland has been a headache to the state because the city cannot provide computerized information in a form that Sacramento's computers can read.

"We have been having problems with Oakland since 1991," said Alta Widener, coordinator of the state's California Fire Incident Reporting System.

"They say they're having (computer) hardware and software problems. I've called and called."

Oakland Fire Chief P. Lamont Ewell, however, bristles at the claim that Oakland isn't sending the state the required data. The fire department collects information on fire deaths and sends it to the state, Ewell said, but the state sends it back as unusable.

— Craig Staats

common is drug-induced carelessness.

In the 71st Avenue fire, the children's mother had spent the night drinking wine and smoking marijuana and the fire started with a discarded marijuana cigarette, investigators said.

The standard yardstick for comparing cities' fire deaths is the average annual deaths per million residents.

Between 1990 and 1994, Oakland averaged 12 deaths per year, excluding the 1991 firestorm. That translates into a deaths per million rate of 32.2.

Oakland's fire toll

Deaths, 1984-1995



Source: Oakland Fire Department

JEFF QUAN—Staff

In comparison, for the same period, San Jose averaged 3.4 fire deaths a year for a rate of 4.3 deaths per million. San Francisco averaged 14.8 deaths, for a rate of 20.4 deaths per million.

California's rate, for the period from 1990 through 1993 (the latest year that statewide numbers are available), was 10.6 deaths per million.

In a 1994 study by USA Today, Oakland's fire deaths, including victims of the 1991 firestorm, put it among the top 10 among cities with more than 250,000 people.

Oakland's grim toll stands in stark contrast to a national success story — a steady drop in the number of fire fatalities since the late 1970s.

According to figures collected by the National Fire Protection Association, the annual toll has fallen 42 percent since 1977, from 7,395 to 4,275 last year.

Oakland officials say they are working on several fronts to reduce the annual death toll, but part of the problem is too many people see home fires as something that happens to somebody else.

"In this country, we still believe it's other people who are going to have a fire," Ewell said.

Over the past 12 years, the biggest single cause of fatal fires in Oakland comes as no surprise: discarded cigarettes.

According to fire department re-

cords, 31 percent of the city's fatal fires were ignited by discarded cigarettes or other smoking materials, including the scourge of the '90s: crack cocaine pipes.

Another 14 percent of fatal fires resulted from defective floor furnaces, space heaters or other heating mishaps, and 11 percent were caused by cooking accidents, such as pots left on stoves.

If a fire does break out, one way to increase your chances of surviving is a smoke detector. More than 90 percent of U.S. homes have the alarms and experts credit them for at least part of the national decline in fire deaths.

In Oakland, the fire department's statistics show that there is a clear connection between the absence of a working smoke detector and the risk of dying in a residential fire.

In more than three-quarters of the city's fatal fires since 1984, there was either no smoke detector or other fire protection, or a detector was installed but not working.

Smoke detectors weren't enough to save a life in 15 percent of the fatal fires.

Some cities have dramatically reduced their fire deaths with smoke detector giveaway programs. Oakland has one, too, but officials concede more needs to be done.

Tomorrow: What is Oakland doing to reduce its fire death toll?

high fire death rate on the poverty of many of its residents, crowded



JEFF QUAN—Staff